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Lectionary 22A, Matthew 16:21-28
What Shall You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Even good and faithful people might need to be rebuked from time to time. In this morning's Bible Lessons, two of my heroes receive rebukes — and they receive their censure not simply from their neighbors, but from God himself. I mean Jeremiah and St. Peter. My man Jeremiah employs his usual eloquence to protest about the troubles he has had to endure along the way of trying to be a faithful prophet. He even dares to wonder whether the LORD has been deceitful to him. His defiant words go this way:

Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail? (Jeremiah 15:18, RSV)

We can give credit to Jeremiah for a confidence in God so vast that he feels he can pour out his heart to the LORD in prayer, holding nothing back. Still, he receives a stern rebuke from the LORD. Jeremiah is certainly brought down a peg when the LORD tells him he needs to repent:

¹⁹Therefore thus says the LORD:
"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth. (Jeremiah 15:19, RSV)

Sinners need to repent. Do *prophets* likewise need repentance? Well, judging by Jeremiah, yes, even prophets need to repent and mend their ways from time to time.

Same with apostles. Think of St. Peter. Last Sunday he was flying high. He had given his great testimony that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel and that he, Jesus, is the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus had praised Peter for his words and declared that he would build his church on Peter or Peter's faith. Either way — whether Jesus builds his church on Peter or on Peter's faith — either way, Jesus is speaking well of Peter. But now, in today's Gospel story, Jesus rebukes Peter with fierce words:

Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men. (Matthew 16:23, RSV)

In this way, Jesus tries to head Peter off from a wrong understanding of what it means to be Israel's Messiah and what it means to be Son of the living God. Peter seemed to think that he was aligning himself with glory. I mean, if you are the friend of the Son of the living God, then is it not reasonable to expect crowns and to anticipate security?¹ Well, it *is* reasonable *if* you are thinking along normal human lines. But the drama of today's passage is that it gives us a glimpse into the way our Maker thinks of things.

Jesus rebukes Peter because that man has no idea of the danger he poses. Our Bible reading this morning is of immense importance because of its divine perspective. Something godly is afoot with Jesus of Nazareth — something divine going all the way back to creation. When Jesus speaks of his destiny to go to Jerusalem and to die on the cross, this has been the divine plan from the beginning. It is something Jesus says he *must* do. It is as if our Maker knew that if he made us human beings, in the end He Himself was going to have to suffer that we humans might live. It is as if Almighty God could see the writing on the wall for us humans. He could see that if he gave us freedom to love and obey Him *or* to depart from Him, too often we would choose to depart. So, did our Maker drop his idea of creating humanity? No, he forged ahead and has loved us passionately ever since. But in doing this, our Maker stood ready to suffer on our behalf. Throughout Israel's history, the Lord had grieved over the sins and disobedience of his people. Now, with Jesus of Nazareth, the crisis point has arrived. When Jesus speaks of the Cross, he is not speaking of a mere happenstance, but of a plan of action that our Triune God resolved upon from the beginning:

²¹From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, ESV)

It is a plan of action so awesome that Jesus himself will tremble before it in the Garden of Gethsemane.

These are things which Peter does not understand. Peter is happy that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of the living God. But he is clueless at this time of the inner meaning of these things. As for Jesus, he is determined that Peter shall not distract him from his path.

So, these have been some thoughts about Peter and about Jesus continuing steadfast on his path toward the cross.

Now, let us shift the perspective toward you and me. Jesus leads us this way with these words:

¹ A point made by Chrysostom in his homily on this passage.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, ESV)

With these words, it becomes clear for us human beings that the Lord's way of life is to be our way of life too. If our Maker's love for us can lead his only begotten Son to take up the cross, then the way of the cross is to be our natural way too. Our life must not be out-of-kilter with God's way of life. We do not get to be bystanders, looking on as Jesus heads toward Jerusalem and the cross. And so, in this passage, Jesus makes it clear that his way of the cross is to be our way too. Perhaps this is the most profound meaning of the idea that we are created in the "image" of God. To bear God's image means that we human beings were created to be such people of love that we are willing to suffer along the way. We are at our absolute best when we taking up our cross and following Jesus.

And now we come to my chief concern in this sermon. My chief concern is for our souls. Jesus phrases things in such a way that he leads us to think of eternity. It matters whether we take up the cross. It matters in an eternal way. And so Jesus says this to us:

²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, ESV)

And to this talk of losing our soul, St. John Chrysostom directs a piercing question:

What? hast thou another soul to give for this soul?
(Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, NPNF1-10)

I mean, if we should work half-a-lifetime building up our money, and then lose it all, well, we can work another half-a-life time and try to rebuild our money. But if we lose our soul, what can we give in exchange? No, that would be a terrible thing, to lose our soul! I do not want you to lose your soul. I do not want to lose my soul.

The Greek word translated as "soul" can also be translated as "life." Our translation is a modern translation called the "English Standard Version." This version follows the old King James Version in shifting the translation of this Greek word, ψυχή psuche, according to the context. The key verses, then, start off speaking of "life" — of breath, of these threescore and ten years granted to us — but then shifts to the word "soul," which means not simply a human life,

but a human life designed for everlasting blessedness... a human life in the perspective of eternity. So, the key verses go this way:

²⁵For whoever would save his *life* will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his *soul*? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:25-26, ESV)

The context makes it appropriate to shift to the word “soul.” The context is our Lord’s discussion of his return:

²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Do you see what I mean? When Jesus asks us what does it profit us to gain the whole world, but lose our life, he means more than losing these seventy or eighty or one hundred years on this green earth. He is talking about our souls. He is talking about his Second Coming and his judgment on our lives.

Now, this is an old-fashioned topic. What will it profit us to gain the whole world, but lose our souls? You know the answer: It would be a poor exchange. Jesus was offered that exchange in his wilderness temptations. Satan took off the gloves and went straight to his crassest temptation:

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! for it is written,

‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” (Matthew 4:8-10, RSV)

And so it is that Jesus did not lose *his* soul. Now, in today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus asks us to follow his example. To be a Christian means entering into combat with sin, the devil, and even with ourselves. But let us not trade the whole world for our souls.

The call of Jesus begins with “if”:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, ESV)

Some “if” statements have little consequence if the condition goes unfulfilled. But not this one. Jesus compels no one to come after him. It is our choice. It is our freedom. But *if* would follow Jesus, let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, and thereby do our souls some good.

Peter might have been thinking of crowns and future security, but Jesus is thinking of the cross and of our souls. To borrow a phrase from Chrysostom, “a grievous war is about to be kindled.” Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. He will suffer the cross. And he does not want his disciples to lose their souls along the way. He does not want *us* to lose our souls. He does not want us to live a life unworthy of the one our Maker intended for us. He does not want us to live a life that is a mere shadow of what it could have been. Always, a grievous war is about to be kindled, and Jesus wants us to not hold back, but to enter the conflict, struggling always for this matter of love, accepting the cross along the way, and knowing that if we should fall, there is eternal life ahead of us anyway, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.